Becoming a Transformative Service Mediator: school education, parents, and their children during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the process of acquiring the role of Apomediary Transformative Service Mediator (TSM) when supporting vulnerable consumers. We introduce a four-step process with specific guidelines aiming at avoiding making TSMs vulnerable. By coupling the Autoethnographic methods with Introspection, we examine the process of becoming a TSM Apomediary based on one of the authors' accounts, online conversations between parents, school communications, and interviews. We identify the process of becoming a TSM, analyzing the main hurdles that could lead to vulnerability while transitioning into this new role, hindering their efforts as TSMs. While extant theory focuses on the conscious process of becoming a TSM, the research highlights the process of becoming one unexpectedly. By showing this process's inner details, we offer managerial recommendations for serving vulnerable populations, therefore contributing to literature.

Keywords: *Well-being, Transformative Service, Ethnography.*

Track: *Services Marketing*

1. Introduction

Lockdown measures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unexpected negative side effects, especially for vulnerable consumers, that is, consumers whose limited access to and control over resources inhibit their ability to function in the marketplace (Hill and Sharma, 2020). For instance, the closing of schools hindered the quality of education of children from low-income families (Dunn *et al.*, 2020). School's service providers were forced to start using virtual platforms and teleconferencing services (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) to provide their services (Dhawan, 2020). While helpful, these solutions had unintended negative consequences to vulnerable consumers (e.g., children, elderly, a person with a disability) and caretakers. To minimize the pandemic's negative impact on vulnerable consumers, these caretakers were forced assume additional tasks and become one of two types of Transformative Service Mediators-TSM (Johns and Davey, 2019): (a) TSM Intermediary facilitating service delivery through interactions with other TSMs; (b) TSM Apomediary - focusing on representing the vulnerable consumer to the service provider and other TSMs.

During the pandemic, the quickness of the change and lack of preparedness of the actors involved may have hurt value co-creation in these service settings (Moazzami *et al.*, 2020). To closely examine this process of becoming an unexpected TSM apomediary, we focus on children's educational services due to their intrinsic vulnerability and the potential harm this situation caused to working parents pressured between household chores, work demands, and mediating online learning. In doing so, we make several contributions to extant literature. First, prior research shows that forcing informal caretakers of children and adults with disabilities into a TSM apomediary hurts the caretaker (Dhawan, 2020). We contribute to that extant work by painting a nuanced picture of how a transition from a TSM intermediary to apomediary takes place, being able to provide more clear guidelines on how caretakers can better navigate such a transition. Relatedly, we contribute to Johns and Davey's (2019) framework by providing a roadmap to facilitate such transition while focusing on unprepared and unsupported individuals struggling in this newly acquired role as TSM apomediary. Additionally, we add to the third-party/triads literature by answering Keeling *et al.*'s (2018) call for more studies into this third individual's role that stands beside the vulnerable consumer in service relationships. Finally, we also contribute to the literature on transformative value, advancing Blocker and Barrios' (2015) study by offering a roadmap that helps an organization to well-equip service providers (TSM).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Transformative Services and Vulnerable Consumers

TSR research encompasses relationships between services, individuals, and societal well-being (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015), focusing on interactions between service organizations and customer entities trying to understand how well-being directed outcomes could be achieved (Anderson *et al*., 2013). While traditionally service occurs between the provider and the recipient, this is not true vulnerable consumers, who need a more complex ecosystem to account for their vulnerability (Johns and Davey, 2019).

Consumers become vulnerable when they experience a state of powerlessness due to an imbalance in market relationships (Baker *et al*., 2005), subjecting them to harm due to their restricted access and control over resources that are essential for their well-being, inhibiting their ability to function in the marketplace (Hill and Sharma, 2020). Amidst their development, children are especially vulnerable (Baker *et al*., 2015; Hill and Sharma, 2020), lacking abilities (cognitive and social) to be savvy in the marketplace (Spotswood and Nairn, 2016). Therefore, children depend on parents and age-appropriate parenting practices to develop fully (Prinz, 2012). During the pandemic, children were forced to study from home demanding support from parents. This situation generated several vulnerabilities, such as (a) children's online learning adaption and difficulties; (b) tensions originated from parent's unexpected teaching roles, and (c) parent's time scarcity originated from balancing multiple roles (e.g., wife, mother, worker) that contributed to (d) an overall incompetence feeling (Mercer, 2004).

2.2 Transformative Value and Transformative Service Mediators

Transformative value is created when human agents contest and alter social structures to influence service design and service practices, therefore moving from habitual to transformative value, that is, "a social dimension of value creation which illuminates uplifting changes among individuals and collectives in the marketplace" (Blocker and Barrios, 2015, p. 1). McColl-Kennedy *et al*. (2012) argue that consumers act as resource integrators when pursuing value and that they can search for resources beyond the focal firm (e.g., other firms, peers, friends, and family). Such a perspective ignores, however, that vulnerable consumers can face difficulties in carrying out these activities, therefore needing support in those integrating activities (Johns and Davey, 2019). Accordingly, Johns and Davey (2019, p.6) indicated that transformative value creation could often only emerge through the involvement

of a third actor, which they coined Transformative Service Mediators – TSM. A TSM is defined as the person that "may act for either or both the service provider and the consumer, undertake a variety of activities that constrain or enhance service value." Within a continuum, TSMs can be: Intermediary – facilitating service provision by standing between a customer and a firm while assuming tasks (e.g., information broker, service integrator, translator of risks, service provider's advocate); Apomediary – resource integrators that accompany the vulnerable consumer during service provision while co-creating value (co-designing services, enabling benefits and managing risks, and advocating for vulnerable consumers).

Consistent with social-role theory, individuals in the process of becoming a TSM are likely to experience four distinct stages (Thornton and Nardi, 1975): (1) Anticipatory (expectations before the acquisition and anticipatory learning efforts); (2) Formal (formalized expectations learned as role incumbent, expected behavior, and role-related knowledge and skills); (3) Informal (unofficial and informal expectations and ways of doing it arising from interactions with peers and others); and (4) Personal (personal role expectations acquired via previous stages). Relatedly, other social-role researchers propose that when experiencing this new role, one must perform two important tasks – role identification (acceptance and internalization of the role) and role readiness (readiness to exercise the role) (Verleye, 2015).

3. Methods

To address those important issues, we follow Roy and Uekusa's (2020) recommendations on using self-narratives to study pandemic-related phenomena. We draw on work from Holbrook (2005), Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), and Gould (1995) to construct a research method that relies on an autoethnographic perspective coupled with Introspection. This method relies primarily on the researchers' life experiences as data. We chose this approach because one of the authors was a member of the population of interest (a parent with children in schools during the pandemic crisis), providing rich and unparalleled access to insights about the transformational process of becoming a TSM apomediary. Specifically, we focused on syncretic combinations of Introspection by coupling researcher introspection (e.g., the researcher studies him/herself) with interactive Introspection (e.g., the researcher assists others in their introspections) (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). The author-autoethnographer also helped other parents do their Introspection, using the process as an additional mechanism of self-reflection. Additional data was collected from the school (employees and teachers), her family (husband and kids), and other families involved with the school (mothers and kids).

4. Results

The author-autoethnographer is a woman born in 1980 who followed her father as an academic. She is the mother of three girls; two are enrolled in an international school's 3rd and 8th grades and are 9 and 14 years old. She has been living in quarantine while having recently returned to work in teaching and research after a period of maternity leave and expatriation. To analyze this role-acquiring process, we build on the framework proposed by Johns and Davey (2019) and delve into the internal processes that an individual experiences.

The first case of COVID-19 was announced on February 26th. A few days later, with rising cases and media coverage, the author-autoethnographer's family was quarantined as one of the husband's co-workers became sick, fostering negative emotions and anxiety over the future. Soon after, the schools closed, and online learning became a reality. Notwithstanding being taken by surprise, those involved understood that the school's educational service was about to change, but without grasping the long-term nature of this solution. Gradually, parents began to understand the pandemic's timeline and its impact on their role, changing from a TSM intermediary to a TSM apomediary. This process can be better understood if we analyze it under the prism of the four-step process of role acquisition (Thornton and Nardi, 1975):

At this **first step (anticipation)**, before incumbency, parents pierced together from several sources (communications from the school, other parents, and mass media) what would be this new role. Surprisingly, at first, a romantic view of the role emerged. This was fueled by the school's discourse that focused on anticipating certain role features, such as the need for parents' support, teamwork, feedback, confidence, patience, and flexibility.

During this phase, the parent's lack of experience caused anxiety about their role. While involved parents showed role identification, they lacked role readiness (e.g., unable to play the role) (Verleye, 2015). Once comfortable with their TSM intermediary role, they needed to prepare for the new responsibilities associated with a TSM apomediary (e.g., watching classes, managing apps), failing to understand how their role would evolve clearly.

The **second step (formalization)** began when the school sent the TSMs (typically parents) detailed instructions on activities, instructions, and expectations about parents and students' roles; for instance, parents of children aged 8-10 should (1) prepare a children's study space, (2) establish routines, (3) monitor daily tasks, (4) start and end the day with expectations-based discussions. The school devised anxiety-reducing strategies (e.g., teachers sharing provisional material) while preparing for the next learning phase. This intermediary process lasted a few days and gave parents an initial idea of the demands of a TSM

apomediary. Notably, the school's instructions focused on *what* rather than *how* activities should be performed.

The educational service that parents were struggling to facilitate and mediate was delivered out of the appropriate servicescape–a physical place where the service and its associated social and symbolic elements (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). While the school environment would positively moderate student experience (e.g., temperature, sound, friends, recess, playtime, study time), the home environment could negatively affect learning due to inadequate servicespace (e.g., improvised, confusing, uncomfortable, unstructured, and oftentimes noisy). This second step was dysfunctional, causing parents and students additional difficulties adjusting to the new role. The instructions and activities sent by school staff were impractical. Finally, communication broke down, and planned parent-teacher conferences were canceled, eliminating a chance of improving the relationship and preparing the TSMs adequately for their role.

Step three (informalization) began when the principal emailed parents the results of a satisfaction survey he collected from parents, praising the school's performance. The parents thought that the principal's statement was misleading, as they experienced first-hand the multiple hurdles associated with the transition, causing them to start taking matters into their own hands.

Several informal communication channels between fellow TSMs ensued, supported by a shared sense of belonging, which brought the parents together. This bond became crucial in attaining proper value co-creation. Parents became motivated to prove their competence and knowledge, engaging in several resource-integrating activities. These activities can perhaps be better interpreted as a 'role as resource' in Baker and Faulkner (1991)'s framework: TSMs began to adapt their behavior based on their abilities to solve technical issues, to share different methods for solving problems related to the use of technology or pedagogical hurdles, and to (re)design the service.

Step four (personalization) began when parents got experienced enough to start influencing the meaning of their role as TSM apomediaries. Parents began to offer each other more structured and science-based recommendations (e.g., gamification, the importance of peer learning). Meanwhile, parents started demanding tuition cuts since they were co-producing the service. By the end of the semester, parents had already assumed their role as TSM apomediaries, but on their terms. They reshaped their lives to accommodate this new role and their relationship with the school, with some TSMs (particularly women) pausing their careers and quitting jobs. Others managed to incorporate this new role into their

overloaded schedule. Some developed better strategies on how to deal with their expectations and their idealized image of themselves as educators.

Better adapted to the circumstances and their new role as TSM apomediaries, most parents modified the scope of their educational activities, suggesting schedules/activities and avoiding children's overload. As a response, the school started accepting the TSMs' suggestions, generating productive discussions that facilitated the solution for lingering issues. Despite these positive developments, however, some parents felt abandoned by the school and could not properly perform their role as TSM apomediaries. In this challenging process, the school faced some setbacks: (1) lowered reputation, (2) fewer clients, and (3) lower parental loyalty due to dissatisfaction and lack of empathy.

In closing, a deeper reflection on the transition from TSM intermediary to TSM apomediary reveals two important points. First, the role acquisition and co-creation process of TSM depends highly on all individuals involved in value co-creation. Second, a firm cannot create value without individuals' engagement; the more vulnerable the consumer is, the more important the role of TSM in ensuring the quality of the service being provided. Next, we examine the contribution of our findings to the extant literature and propose important managerial implications.

5. Discussion

Our focus was on emerging vulnerabilities for those involved in transformative services and what kind of support is needed for those unexpectedly acquiring TSM roles. For this endeavor, we drew on and contributed to Johns and Davey's (2019) work by presenting a deeper understanding of the TSM concept by shedding light on the unexpected TSM.

Our study shows that this transition turned parents into another vulnerable actor within the educational service ecosystem because they were not (or did not feel) prepared to assume this new role. By focusing on this important actor in service provision for vulnerable consumers, we fulfill Keeling *et al*.'s (2018) call for more research on triads (service provider, service recipient, and companion). Our results portray the difficulties these individuals face when unexpectedly assuming this role as TSM. Additionally, we contribute to the literature on role acquisition and TSM (Thornton and Nardi, 1975; Verleye, 2015; Davey and Grönroos, 2019) by proposing that this lack of preparedness can be divided into three dimensions:

- Role readiness: the TSM is not prepared for the role, with no service literacy. Despite several school efforts, parents needed help to develop role-related knowledge. Over time, parents overcame this obstacle through adaptation and imitation strategies.

- Role technical knowledge: the TSM needs to prepare to deal with all the technical aspects of the role, limiting his ability to ensure adequate service. Parents lacked technical (e.g., use of apps and devices) and pedagogical knowledge. They managed to overcome this limitation when informal communication channels appeared, allowing them to rely on other TSMs to better perform their role as TSM.

- Role behavioral aspects: the TSM is unaware of how to behave and manage their relationship with the consumer. Parents needed more insights on how to work with children/students while teaching. The assortment of their roles relating to the school, their children, and their roles as TSMs and educators demanded different approaches and behaviors. We also note that the difficulties parents faced when trying to maintain their emotions under control and not pressure their kids.

In that, our findings also contribute to Blocker and Barrios' (2015) work by portraying the pitfalls and barriers that can hinder transformative value in situations where TSMs are crucial for service delivery, while showcasing the efforts of TSMs in contesting the school and altering the service process for the creation of transformative value.

5.2 Practical implications and future research

Also, our research has important implications for organizations that service vulnerable consumers, particularly when the vulnerability arrives suddenly and unexpectedly. When situations demand that the service (education) must be provided in a non-traditional servicescape (at home), service organizations should: (1) develop servicescape adaption; (2) design training activities. Organizations that depend on unexpected TSMs to service vulnerable consumers must be prepared in advance because this process must be implemented quickly. Organizations need training material, support systems, and motivation strategies to promptly embrace the TMSs-to-be as they transition to this new role, therefore managing expectations and sharing information on how to perform the role. Aditionally, organizations must be prepared for a phase were TSMs become co-creators of their new roles

Moreover, it is not uncommon for individuals that have relationships with a vulnerable person to become a TSM unexpectedly. For instance, when an older person faces health issues (e.g., physical or mental) and needs help in self-care or making complex decisions (e.g., buying a house), their sons become caretakers, acting as TSMs. Our autoethnographic study shows the process of becoming a TSM when those involved have no training. Service organizations that will have to deal with unprepared TSMs, which is often the case, would benefit from our findings as we suggest how to deal with these individuals during the process.

If not performed adequately, the TSMs, who are secondary customers, also become vulnerable in this interaction, giving rise to a "secondary vulnerability" (Leino 2017) that can further reduce this service ecosystem's well-being.

In our research, we focused on the experiences of the TSM. Still, another interesting approach would be to focus on the vulnerable person's experience, considering their aptitude and willingness to follow TSM guidance and directions. Future research could examine this interesting development of our work. Moreover, future research could expand our examination to other contexts and use different methods to advance further and refine the exploratory findings of our analysis.

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